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Roger Luckhurst

The Science-Fictionalization of Trauma: Remarks on Narratives of Alien Abduction

1997 is the fiftieth anniversary of the alleged saucer crash at Roswell and ten years since the American bestseller list included the two texts which consolidated the visual iconography and narrative scenario of alien abduction in the popular imaginary, Whitley Strieber's *Communion* and Budd Hopkins's *Intruders*. On the face of it, these are not dates likely to be commemorated by the sf community. The reasons are obvious: legitimating sf is hardly furthered by associating the genre with obsessive skywatchers, conspiracy theorists, and groups of people claiming prolonged abuse by four-foot-tall gray creatures from outer space. It is the very elision of sf and UFOlogy that has caused exasperation, and ensured mutual suspicion between UFOlogists and the sf community.¹ Since the study of sf established an academic footing in the early 1970s, this separation has increased: Darko Suvin's rationalist model of "cognitive estrangement," for example, offered no space for what would undoubtedly be termed UFO "mysticism." At about the same moment, John Sladek's *The New Apocrypha* (1974), a debunking of pseudo-sciences, included a chapter entitled "Will U kindly FO?" Such sentiments have remained relatively consistent: Edward James's recent survey, *Science Fiction in the Twentieth Century* (1994) feels obliged to offer only a few pages on what he calls the "Lunatic Fringe." This margin of the margin, as it were, is acknowledged to be constellated with sf, but all the more to mark out sf's distance from it.

I suggest it is time we break with this anxiety about contamination and de-legitimation. An analysis is long overdue of the return of interest in UFOs and the phenomenal success that narratives of alien abduction have had in becoming embedded in cultural imaginaries in the 1980s and 1990s. Its absence from sf criticism is regrettable, as the interdisciplinary skills of sf critics are well suited to analyzing this phenomenon. Any account would have to be informed by recent transformations in psychiatry, in postwar American political history, in the effects wrought on everyday experience by new technologies, and in the authority of the discourse of science. These diverse factors, however, could only produce the phenomena of alien abduction by cohering within the generic frame provided by science-fiction narratives—or, to be more accurate, by the *science-fictionalization of wider narratives of self and society*. Alien abduction is a surprising confirmation of the argument Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. has made that "SF has ceased to be a genre of fiction *per se*, becoming instead a mode of awareness about the world" (308). If we are to take seriously this and

parallel assertions by Fredric Jameson that genres have “spread out and colonized reality itself (*Postmodernism* 371), UFOlogy and abduction narratives have to be seen as privileged loci of a partial process of science-fictionalization in the contemporary moment. This process of generic dispersion can alone explain the appearance of abduction narratives in diverse locations: from unofficial “scientific” organizations, to Ivy League university psychiatry departments, popular TV series like *The X-Files* and unpopular ones like *Dark Skies*, to endless pages on the Internet, and even advertising. In turning away from what is undoubtedly a florid discourse, sf critics fail to play their part in analyzing a remarkable generic extension and, perhaps more importantly, fail to evaluate the increasing feedback effect that the cultural availability of the abduction narrative has had on sf itself.²

In what follows, I analyze the matrix from which alien abduction emerges, insisting that only a multi-disciplinary approach can begin to discern the complex elements which produce this cultural phenomenon. I conclude with a discussion of *The X-Files*, since this has been the primary route of dissemination for the abduction scenario into the popular imaginary.

Since abduction UFOlogy is a notoriously *implicated* discourse (commentators being drawn to it by prior disposition to believe—“I envy them their experiences.... I *want* them to be true” [Bryan 605]), my position should be clarified from the start. The abductee is, for me, an exemplary instance of what Ian Hacking terms a “made up person.” Hacking suggests that the invention of categories in population statistics, medical discourse, and elsewhere “creates new ways for people to be” (“Making Up People” 223). Hacking proposes a *dynamic* process in which “people classified in a certain way tend to conform to or grow into the ways they are described; but they also evolve their own ways” (*Rewriting* 21). So it is that abduction becomes an unforeseen “explanation” of trauma, and people begin to describe their life experience through this etiology, fully convinced of its efficacy precisely *because* of its generic nature. From this, I would assert that although alien abduction is not true, it is also not simply false, for textual distance from abductees should not, as Carolin McLeod, Barbara Corbisier, and John Mack pointed out in 1992 in “A More Parsimonious Explanation for UFO Abduction” (*Psychological Inquiry* 7.2:156-68), efface the very real traumatic response that people *actually* experience, however “fictive” the category is. What is required is an analysis of how the category comes about and what it is this science-fictionalization attempts to answer in the contemporary moment. I will suggest that sf has become a suturing narrative that heals a felt *intermittency of contemporary subjectivity*. Let’s begin, however, with the scenario that abduction literature has put in place.

The Abduction Scenario. A synthesis of the principal accounts on abduction produces something like this:

You are American,³ more likely white, female, mid-30s than not. You suffer aversions, phobias (to specific places, sleeping at night; sex, medical doctors, dentists, perhaps children), and you have a profound dread, built around an

absence, a gap, that you feel is structural to your life. This gap can range from the vague to a specific moment: a disturbed night, the oppressive residues of a nightmare, perhaps coupled with the distress of nosebleeds or puzzling marks on the body; a sense of confused temporality which constitutes a determinable gap of "missing time." Your phobias may become increasingly unmanageable, forcing you to seek help, or else (more commonly) flashes of content begin to return to fill in the absence, sometimes triggered by reading or viewing UFO-related material. These fragments of recall direct you to a trauma counsellor: full events are reconstructed, predominantly (though not exclusively) by hypnotic regression. This is what you will remember: you wake at night / your car fails on a lonely road, and you become aware of small figures surrounding you. They are small, gray, and not human. Your partner/passenger is immobile, somehow "switched off." You are injected or pierced by a beam of light. Either you feel yourself floating off the bed / out of the car, or, without transition, you reawake to find yourself naked and paralysed on a table in an unfamiliar room. The figures gather around you, and proceed to examine you. At the core of this traumatic scene are penetrative procedures: immense pain at the insertion of probes into nose or ear (even eye); investigation of rectal and genital areas; the humiliating stimulation of the penis and apparent removal of sperm; or procedures to examine the womb which resemble laparoscopy. You survive this, only to experience the intense gaze of one, perhaps differentiated being, who seems to penetrate your mind, implanting messages, most often of the kind: "You will not remember." This will end your first recall. Subsequent sessions will uncover multiple experiences, often going back to childhood (seven is a popular age to start). You and your therapist may uncover similar experiences across the generations of your family. Your experience may also be extended: you will pass on from the examination room to be given "visions" of global destruction, to be presented with what you presume to be human-alien hybrid children. By this stage, and after some initial resistance, you with your therapist will have nominated yourself an abductee.

There are a number of things to be said about this generic narrative. I have rendered it in the second person in order to preserve the way an abductee subject position is constructed by a general narrative presented as a way of organizing fragmented images and affects. *You* are invited, somewhat coercively, to fill the place of the empty shifter, the "you" of the narrative. I have also told *the plot* of this scenario (the order of emergence) rather than the *story* (the chronological sequence) to point to how "recovery" works by effect-and-cause (gaps that *come* to be explained by abduction) rather than cause-and-effect (abduction *causes* gaps by enforced forgetting). Equally, it is important to be aware that this scenario has evolved over a number of stages. The ur-abduction, the Betty and Barney Hill case of 1961 (written up 1966 and filmed by John Fuller in 1975), contained many of these elements—particularly recovery by hypnosis—with the same title, *The Interrupted Journey*, but was not interpreted in this way. The description was too close to the host of 1950s "contactees" like George Adamski; he spoke of benign Space Brothers bearing messages uncannily familiar from B-movies such as *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, and was widely held to have set back serious UFOlogy. Raymond Fowler's *The Andreasson Affair*, concerning the experiences of Betty Andreasson, was also considered anomalous when first issued in 1979. Budd Hopkins's *Missing Time* (1981) provided the research method and outline of the scenario, but it

was only in 1987, in *Intruders: The Incredible Visitations at Copley Woods*, that Hopkins elaborated abduction in terms of a “long-term, specific, experimental purpose” (35), with alien beings focused on human reproductive abilities. This was consolidated by David Jacobs’ *Secret Life* (1992), which insisted that “reproductive procedures are a constant feature of the abduction experience and are ultimately directed to the production of offspring” (316). The scenario has moved on since, with Mack (1994) displacing the focus from penetrative procedures to the spiritual awakening attendant to the later forms of “envisioning” global disaster. Like all good genres, then, this scene is mobile, constantly modulating itself into new forms around a basic set of moves. These shifting emphases should also make it plain that the “classic” scenario of abduction (embedded in cultural representation by *The X-Files* or *Communion*) is one which is much contested. Although almost solely elaborated by Budd Hopkins—Strieber and Mack dedicate books to him—subsequent disagreements have arisen: Strieber has denounced Hopkins (*Transformation* 275-76); Hopkins has implied, in an interview with Michael Lindemann, that Strieber is insane (Lindemann 147); Bryan reports that the famous MIT conference on abduction in 1992 was split between supporters of the alarmists (Hopkins and Jacobs) and spiritualists (Strieber and Mack). Debates on what is essential or accidental to abduction, as to where the core meaning lies, as to what constitutes a “classic” or an “anomaly,” are nothing less than genre debates.

Newman and Baumeister assert “that most people in this country now have some familiarity with the UFO abduction phenomena” (102), whether they believe it, mock it, or claim to have experienced it. The cultural availability of such a science fiction requires explanation, and a multi-focal one. To be more specific, I argue that the emergence of the “abductee” as a new subject is a fascinating product of an overdetermined matrix of factors linking: 1) shifts in psychotherapeutic methodology and the emergence of abuse (sexual or otherwise) as the determining “secret” of contemporary subjectivity, one increasingly defined in terms of the interplay of memory and trauma; 2) rapid transformations of the quotidian world by new technologies and consequent adjustments to the discourse of scientific discourse, partly responsible for the upsurge of New Age countercultures; 3) disidentification by large sectors of the US population from Washington politics, an apathy that finds sublimation in post-war conspiracy theories. In other words, the body of the abductee is a switching center that bears the marks of shifting configurations of interior subjectivity and exterior embodiment in contemporary America. Analyzing these in turn, it is necessary first to look to psychology: this may digress from sf, but is vital if we are to understand this particular mechanism of science fictionalization.

1. Memoro-Politics. Since about 1980, Americans have been given a peculiar injunction, they have been *subject to an incitement to remember*. If the category of “memory” can be divided into personal identity, the collective practices of commemoration, and the institutional disciplines which determine the means and meanings of recall (as Antze and Lambek suggest), then each of

these modalities can be claimed to have undergone destabilization. The narrative and continuity of personal memory have been transformed by the effects of crises in collective commemoration (challenges to dominant versions of American history, particularly by African American and Native American groups) and, institutionally, by the revolution in psychotherapies which have located identity in terms of the discontinuity of memory resultant from trauma.

It is impossible to discuss alien abduction outside the ways in which institutions have reorganized concepts of memory and identity: "Forgetting, rather than ordinary remembering, is the present locus of memoro-politics ... a politics of the secret, of the forgotten event that can be turned, if only by strange flashbacks, into something monumental" (Hacking, *Rewriting*, 213-4). If the numbers of abductees are "staggering" (Hopkins in Lindemann, 153), in part because so many have secretly encrypted this experience, this is matched by claims that 38% (or higher) of the US population have suffered incest or sexual abuse; that, in 1988, 50,000 babies were murdered in Satanic rituals; that 2% of the population suffer Multiple Personality Disorder.

The elements that produced the general emergence of the therapeutics of recovered memory are all highly relevant to abduction accounts. The emergence of sexual abuse as *the* model of traumatic forgetting has been the predominant factor. Depending on your politics of memory, sexual abuse has either been finally acknowledged as the scandalous truth after decades of suppression by a society silencing its sufferers, or else sexual abuse is a relatively recent psychiatric diagnosis, one that is profoundly important, but has become subject to rapid inflation. The former position, initially advocated by a small group of campaigners became a fantastically successful diagnosis within the psychiatric discipline and has powerful political support. The latter position is a reactive response to perceived inflation, with "false memory" theorists like Richard Ofshe joined by an avalanche of books analyzing the Satanic abuse scare.⁴ A more nuanced stance is set forth Hacking's "The Making and Molding of Child Abuse" (*Critical Inquiry* 17:253-88), which investigates the way sexual abuse emerged in the 1970s, having evolved from the 1960s categories of "battery." Sexual abuse, for Hacking, is a "new description" which is undoubtedly real, yet open to problematic extension through its compelling promise to deliver the final truth.

It is not sexual abuse *per se* that is important so much as the *consequences* it has had on models of the psyche and therapeutic practice in general. In effect it has opened a *space of possibility* for abduction. "Memory" is split and reorganized: the forgotten controls the self, not the remembered. "Believe the Children" campaigns and the importance of affirming abuse accounts has sometimes had the effect of elevating speech into truth, regardless of content. Trauma has been redefined from "an event" to a view in which "it is no longer the observer who determines what should or should not be traumatic, but the patient's own reactions to the event" (Scott, xx-xxi).⁵ The response that Satanic cults or aliens might be fantasies was also blocked by another factor which propelled sexual abuse into the limelight. Freud, according to Jeffrey Masson's *The Assault on Truth: Freud and Child Abuse* (1984), which initiated a widespread public dispute, could not deal with the pervasiveness of sexual

abuse, and so resorted to the argument that seduction accounts were fantasies.⁶ To declare a patient's account a fantasy is held by some to deny the patient's rights. An allied effect of the wholesale rejection of Freud by American psychiatry is the reintroduction of hypnosis. It is the claim of every worker with abductees that hypnosis is the mechanism that unlocks hidden truth, and the claim of every false memory theorist that accounts of Satanists and alien abductors are the effect of hypnotic suggestion.

These broad contexts should be sufficient to situate alien abduction accounts within contemporary US memoro-politics. Without the space of possibility opened by this conjunction of a historically specific model of traumatic forgetting, and the attendant remodulation of techniques of recovery—from fantasy to hypnosis, from interpretation to affirmation—alien abduction narratives would not have materialized.

Abduction narratives are located within the fissures of a psychiatric discourse currently undergoing seismic shifts in the definition of memory. UFOlogists have attempted to mimic psychiatric formulations and nomenclature in order to garner authority (inventing terms like MEFS and EAT—Missing Embryo/Fetus Syndrome and Experienced Anomalous Trauma), and have appropriated its techniques of recovery. Psychiatry has been one of the few academic disciplines to try to decode abduction, but whether offering “birth trauma” (the medical focus of abductions being primordial memories of birth [Lawson]), aliens as “intrusions” of right-hemisphere neurological activity into the left-hemisphere (Persinger), hypnagogic flashes elaborated into pseudo-memories coupled with a masochistic desire to humiliate the self (Newman and Baumeister), or the now conventional argument of false memory created by hypnotic and non-hypnotic suggestion (Clark and Loftus), these accounts have failed to prevent assertions from abduction researchers that “No significant body of thought exists that presents strong evidence that anything else is happening other than what the abductees have stated” (Jacobs 304). This is partly because such literalism is validated by strands of orthodox psychiatry itself. Contextualizing psychiatry within a broader memoro-politics, however, allows me to revisit the key determinants of the emergence of abduction (abuse-structure, hypnosis, and redefinitions of trauma) with a more critical eye.

“Just tell me where it is and who it is.”

She is still afraid. “In a bedroom. In a bedroom. A bedroom,” she cries.

“Who is he? Look at him. Let's just get a —”

“I don't *want* to look at him!” she says firmly....

Tears stain her cheeks, “*I know who he is!*” she says, racked with sobs.

“I've seen him before. Lots of times.... He does things!.... He's right on top of me!” (Bryan, 503-04, edited)

Which narrative scenario are we in? This reads like a classic recovery of childhood abuse. The questioner, though, is Budd Hopkins: the abuse figure is an alien. Indeed, Hopkins has previously told Carol's partner in this joint-abduction case that her conscious memory of sexual abuse by her father “was not the problem. Her father had not caused the trauma, because he was not the source of trauma” (Bryan 483). Driven by the structure of the *hidden* secret, Hopkins sweeps aside remembered abuse. One is astonished to read this, but

only because sexual abuse by fathers operates as *the* trauma of contemporary culture. The weight of that account almost inevitably propels a reader to consider alien abduction as a displaced, symbolic account of sexual abuse. And wouldn't such a displacement have an evident logic? That which is so intimate, so intrafamilial is flipped over: abuse becomes absolutely extrafamilial, even to the extent of being *extraterrestrial*; i.e., it could not be pushed further away.

As the politics of memory intensified during the 1980s, the pressure of this alien-as-screen-memory begins to be explicitly dealt with by researchers. In the relatively innocent days of Hopkins's *Missing Time*, Virginia's memory of a "grandfatherly" alien who gently talks to her and allows her to explore his body did not cause alarm (132ff). Once the reproductive focus of abduction comes into view, however, this changes. The tactics of resisting this decoding, retaining aliens *as* aliens, are ingenious. Jacobs, the alarmist, insists that abduction is ongoing, often occurring minutes before a session, and is not some distantly recovered childhood scene. For the more "spiritualist" researchers, proximity to abuse is acknowledged but is neatly incorporated: "Sexual abuse appears to be one of the forms of human woundedness that...has led the aliens to intervene in a protective and healing manner" (Mack, 6; cf "she had an abusive childhood, and the aliens sort of apologized for putting her in that family," Pritchard to Bryan 315). Mack's move is to *invert* the direction of which scene screens the other: "There is not a single abduction case...that has turned out to have masked a history of sexual abuse or any other traumatic cause. But the reverse has occurred—that an abduction history has been revealed in cases investigated for sexual or other traumatic abuse" (Mack 6).

The acknowledgement of abuse has been a significant and positive step. It must play a part in tabulations of alien abduction. However difficult to acknowledge, though, abuse accounts have to some extent also been *engineered* as the prioritized secret, and the risk here is in only transposing one narrative into another with only the *appearance* of an explanatory truth-effect. The very real paths of some abduction narratives comes as much from the severe grief in proximity to alleged abduction (miscarriage, death of children, and, for Strieber, the death of his father) as from potential abuse. Abuse, though, only provides the structure of memory. It cannot account for these *specific* generic contents, and offered as a catch-all explanation only risks mimicking the state of current memory politics.

Hypnotic and non-hypnotic recovery is central to both supporters and detractors of alien abduction. Mack speaks for nearly every other abduction researcher: "information painstakingly recalled under hypnosis is far more reliable than the consciously recalled story" (54), with conviction based on "the intensity of recovered emotion that lends inescapable authenticity to the phenomenon" (400). This is a minority view, held firmly only by recovered-memory therapists, Laurence Kirmayer being representative of the dominant view that "traumatic memories [are] *more*, not less, malleable and influenced by imagination and context-sensitive reconstruction," the "context of retelling" and the "form of narrative" dictating contents (181).

Abduction is fatally complicit in suggestion (whether hypnotic or not).

Hopkins is contacted mainly through the address provided at the end of his books; many of Mack's subjects arrive after seeing him on the mini-series based on Hopkins's *Intruders*. Exponential increases can be linked to the publication of *Communion*. This evident predisposition (well before hypnosis) is not limited to "patients." Strieber cites a letter from a psychiatrist who was directed by an alien hanging around in a bookshop sending telepathic messages to buy Strieber's book (great marketing!). He adds: "The next morning my first analysand brought a dream about being invaded by aliens" (*Transformation* 238). Raymond Fowler concludes his trilogy on Betty Andreasson by revealing the allure of the abduction narrative, beginning the last section: "As I worked on the contents of this book, I was continually subject to...flashbacks" (*The Watchers* 240), which constitute what he takes to be his own abduction.

Researchers seem unaware of how their assertions on technique undermine their credibility. Jacobs' remark that "The stories I was told seemed to take on an air of greater reality as I became more competent in my hypnosis techniques" (25-26) implies increasing contamination, not less. Hopkins's view that "The way we use hypnosis seems to be akin to the way it's used to block memories to start with" (Lindemann 141), backed up by Mack's "Hypnosis...seems uniquely capable of undoing the trauma that occurs in the abductions... [it] seems almost to fit like a template" (cited Bryan 432), is evidence of a catastrophic *mimetic mirroring* effect. Once the technique of recovery uncovers a reverse image of itself, projecting hypnosis as cause (just as Satanic cults are supposed to induce victims to forget by hypnotic suggestion), the whole edifice of research is in trouble. No wonder individual researchers constantly find confirmation of their distinct models, whether alarmist or spiritual.

My point is not that this phenomena is the result of false memories induced via hypnotic suggestion. Ofshe's opinion that "The power of the therapist's suggestions is so great that some patients can develop observable physiological reactions" (7) is as naive as those proponents of "true" recovery. False memory gives all the power to the hypnotist, in a quaint Gothic manner;⁷ true memory gives it to the hypnotized subject. Without Freud, the intricacies of transference and countertransference, the mutual implication of analyst and patient, cannot be theorized by either side.⁸ But more than this, the whole terrain of memoro-politics in which abduction is situated has not yet taken account of work which is radically redefining both hypnosis and the concept of trauma itself.

Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen's cross-cultural work on "trance" situates hypnosis as one form of this trance logic. The question as to "who" is being hypnotized is, for him, nonsensical. In hypnosis, subjectivity is suspended, the self is dissolved into a state "in which it no longer knows *itself*" ("Who's Who?" 59). Patient and analyst enter an indeterminate zone in which "I *am spoken* by the other, I come into the place of the other—who, by the same token, is no longer an *other* but rather 'myself'" (*Emotional Tie* 49-50). What authentic speech is possible here? Worse, theorists since William James have argued that whilst ideas and representations can be remembered and recalled, emotions or affect cannot. You cannot remember pain, only the *idea* of how painful something was. Mack counters this argument with his faith that recovered memories

“encoded in a high state of arousal corresponding to terror” (166) are a mark of authenticity. For others, emotion can only be experienced *in the present*. Those attending hypnotic recovery sessions with abductees may be fully converted by the writhing and screaming of patients, but there are no *subjects* here, and no *past*. As Ruth Leys suggests, such a scene is “an intensely animated miming of the traumatic ‘event’ that occurs in the absence of self-observation” (117).

But what trauma? Is there anything “there,” embedded in visual and auditory memory? The focus on the puzzling variances in responses to trauma (why do Holocaust victims suffer *too much* memory; why do the abused suffer *none at all*?) has led some to argue for forms of trauma that evade conventional forms of memory. Jean-François Lyotard has begun to revise the theory of trauma’s “delayed effect,” by suggesting that the originary (non)event acts to “inscribe effects without the inscription being ‘memorized’ in the form of recollection” (21). Ann Scott, too, has suggested that where trauma pierces the body “it seems to me that memory may be dispersed—violently expelled—rather than abreacted, because it is in a form that cannot be abreacted. Where does it go; where is it located?” (84).

This circles back to the very impetus that generates the abduction scenario: the nagging sense of *a gap that structures memory by its absence*. Trauma, as psychic wound, blasts a hole in signification and memorializing registration. This gap, a “radical unthinkable” (Scott 83), effects something like a sublime terror at a sense of discontinuity or intermittency at the core of the subject. Such an abyssal vanishing compels narrativization: it demands stories to be told, and “the shape of the narrative...protects (reveals and conceals) the gap” (Kirmayer 181). Trance states may reveal the *shape* of the gap, but the suspension of the subject leaves it open to assimilate storytellings, and there is a leap of conviction onto narratives that will suture the gap. Genre stories become truth. This is how Hacking reads it:

Let a scene be recalled, an uncomfortable scene.... There is no conscious structure in which to encode it. But there is one generic description under which to categorize the central action of whoever created the discomfort: child abuse. How shall the scene be continued? The rubric is set out by the generic description. There is a retinue of possible events with which to flesh out (rather literally) the scene. (*Rewriting* 254-25).

This structure is reiterated in other genres of content: mistaking these for truth, though, can have serious consequences. A patient remembers: “People outside my window, looking in, but I knew that wasn’t possible, because...we were on two floors and I would have dreams of, uh, little people...short people coming and walking on me...” (Wright 62, ellipsis in original). Aliens? Wrong: “The little people of Chad’s first dream, who had reminded him of the Seven Dwarfs, were reinterpreted as being members of a [Satanic] cult who regularly abused him over most of his life” (Wright 65-66). The choice of the Gothic genre over sf in this famous case resulted in the father being given a lengthy prison sentence, despite most of the recovered evidence being discredited.

Perhaps the most worrying element of abduction accounts is the way in

which some are manoeuvred into speaking genre stories. One of Hopkins' patients explains his virtual silence during hypnosis thus: "I would see something and I would say to myself in effect 'Well that's what I'm supposed to see'" (*Missing Time* 152). One of Mack's patients exclaims: "Am I bullshitting you?... This is what you submit to a script to *Twilight Zone*" (44-45). These people know they are narrating genre stories; it takes a hypnotist some time to convert it into truth.

Alien abduction accounts are stories propelled by a traumatic gap whose contents may not, finally, be determinable. Conviction and consistency derive precisely from the comfort of generic suturing. This may explain structures, but I now need to address the forces which have dictated the choice of genre: the science-fictionalization of trauma.

2. The Technological Sublime. I have suggested that the reorganization of memory around *the forgotten* structures contemporary subjectivity through punctual gaps, little catastrophes of representational failure, which nevertheless compel narrativization. Such a gap invokes the sublime, in its initial failing yet delayed recuperation to narrative, in its terror followed by recovery. Indeed, the experience of abduction corresponds to Thomas Wiesel's three-stage demarcation of the sublime: a mundane world, broken into by an uncategorizable Thing, followed by assimilation to "generic" explanation (see *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and the Psychology of Transcendence*, 1976). This interior, subjective sublimity is engineered in part by psychotherapeutics, but it is also imbricated in exterior transformations in the everyday world by that which is felt to have a "uniquely problematic and unrepresentable content": technology (Jameson "On *Diva*" 118). That the so-called technological sublime is essential to the constitution of new subjects like the multiple or the abductee is clear: "patients are 'switched' like television channels; elements of trauma are decomposed and recomposed as easily as 'processing' words on a computer; and the patient's past is brought back as easily as 'rewinding' a video cassette" (Borch-Jacobsen, "Who's Who?" 52). These technological analogics structure recovered memory; it is only alien abduction that brings the sublime object of technology fully into its *contents*, and in a post-industrial, technologically saturated America where "the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion" (Haraway 191).

Every stage of an abduction is marked by the technological sublime. Technology has been related to *forgetting* at least since Heidegger's 1955 lecture "Die Frage nach der Technik" ("The Question Concerning Technology," collected in *The Question Concerning Technology and other essays* ([1977]): so, where memory stops and the gap begins in abduction is marked by the electrical failures of the car, or power surges that scramble TVs, radios, telephones: you reawake to the flashing zeros of a digital clock. The distress of "missing time" is in fact the predominant motif for discussions of the technologized contemporary world: technology aims to save time, "it promises a mastery... through lifting the burden of our existence in linear time" (Simpson 51). Missing time as sign of abduction is a science-fictionalized account of *space-time compression*, often noted by sociologists of postmodernity (see David

Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 1989); its penetration into intimate spaces—the car, the home⁹—is frequently discussed in terms of its traumatic effects. Abductees literally *embody* postmodernist rhetoric on the “implanting” of the machine into the human, and they transport the “wetwiring” imaginaries of cyberpunk out into the quotidian world.

The procedures aliens undertake, too, are products of the intense technologization of medicine, especially reproduction, where scientific advances have outstripped medical ethics and lay understanding since the first test-tube baby in 1977. New Reproductive Technologies have, for Adele Clark, replaced management of reproduction with the decomposition of the body into subsystems subject to local and heterogeneous invasive procedures. Mothers are systematically displaced from the medical gaze: “fetal surgery, like post-mortem maternal ventilation and other practices, transforms women into maternal cyborgs for the maintenance of technofetuses” (Casper 195). Combine this with the terrorist tactics of the powerful anti-abortion lobby, whose most famous intervention, *The Silent Scream*, portrayed the “destruction” of a fetus, and we have contexts for both the Satanic cults’ harvesting of fetuses and babies for sacrifice and the project of alien abduction to produce hybrid children. However, where Satanism deploys pure body horror, abduction is more properly sublime: the phase of terror at intrusion, at egg and sperm removal, is replaced by a kind of pathos, even ecstasy which in some abductee accounts reaches religious articulation. The banks of fetus tanks on ships and the hybrid children are always *sickly*: they require contact with human mothers, inviting some to speculate that aliens have lost the capacity to love (see Mack). Kant argued that the sublime ultimately confirmed human superiority; this element of abduction similarly turns terror into a kind of pleasure, since the experience affirms (even sentimentalizes) human emotion. This is another sf trope: alien technological superiority comes with the loss of vitality of emotion.

Abduction narratives therefore oscillate ambivalently regarding reproductive advances: terror at the dissolution of the boundary between the natural and the technological; awe and astonishment at the “miraculous” births now possible; a wrestling back of emotion *in excess* of the technologized world and its instrumental rationality.

These technological contents are implicit in abduction narratives, but the technological sublime helps indicate the very predisposition towards UFOs as sublime objects. David Nye, in his history of the transformations of the American technological sublime, considers the space program as a new investiture of a discourse that expropriates the wordless awe of the sublime for nationalist ends. Watching a rocket launch appeals because “the individual can be lifted out of the quotidian experience in a fundamental rupture of the usual sensory impressions, to be overwhelmed by technological spectacle” (253). It doesn’t need the national trauma of the *Challenger* disaster to expose “the dark promise of unimaginable violence” in this spectacle, however (252). Rocket and advanced aeronautic technology has always had its shadowy other, and the UFO as uncanny double to American technology has been in place since the coining of “flying saucer” in 1947 (“ghost” rockets, indeed, had appeared a year earlier). What electrical technology has not had this ghosting effect?

When Cromwell Varley was working on the transatlantic telegraph in the 1860s, telegraphic messages were insistently doubled by visions, spirits, and raps. When Bell spoke his first words down the telephone, the man who received it was also a medium, who spent time listening to crackles on "dead" lines, trying to discern messages from Mars. When medical science began to use photography, Charles Richet and others were firmly convinced the shutter speed would capture ghosts and spirits. Kipling's story "Wireless" also intertwined radio reception with sensitivity to spirits.¹⁰ The UFO as double to rockets and aircraft resides firmly within this long line of uncanniness surrounding technology: the *spectrality effect* suggests that the alien marks a need to project an agency to an otherwise lifeless technological object, which thus *exceeds* instrumentalization. Every technology produces a new ghost, but in a technologically saturated world the space of irrational excess has itself been colonized by technology. Victorian spirits become postmodern aliens? This is what Strieber suggests: "Perhaps the dead have been having their own technological revolution" (*Communion* 96).

For Nye, the continuity of technology as an affirmation of American nationhood has been disrupted since 1945. With the atom bomb and the nuclear reactor "the classic form of the technological sublime has broken down not because the objects of our contemplation have ceased to be fearful but because terror has become their principal characteristic" (253). Tracking the way in which American technological spectacles increasingly erase the visibility of its workers and become ever more secretive and deadly, he suggests that the technological sublime "manifests a split between those who understand and control machines and those who do not" (60). Disaffection, suspicion and terror at the discourse of science and technology lead to two responses in the contemporary moment: New Ageism and conspiracy. Both are key determinants in how abduction accounts are articulated.

3. New Ageism. The Frankfurt School's theory of an instrumental rationality severing technical efficiency from the Enlightenment project of freedom has had a major influence on contemporary social thought. "Technology has been allowed to become more and more universal as everything is obliged more and more to come under its sway and yield to it" (Simpson 51). Scientific discourse, too, is seen to constitute "the most powerful form of hegemony" (Aronowitz 342), its paradigm dictating legitimacy of knowledge, its institutions, now fully implicated in capital, forming into a "military-industrial-media complex, whose interlocking interests are increasingly well coordinated and increasingly difficult to bypass" (Ross 6). Intellectual critique, however, is overshadowed by more populist and mystical responses to such a technologized lifeworld.

When UFOs persisted in American skies throughout the 1950s, Jung wrote that they were "bid[ding] each of us to remember his own soul and his own wholeness, because this is the answer the West should give to the danger of mass-mindedness" (101). These portents, he thought, "are in accord with an end of an era" (xi). The two main schools on abduction play on the double meaning of apocalypse: disaster (for Jacobs and Hopkins) and revelation (for

Fowler, Mack, and Strieber). The revelatory discourse owes much to Jung, but even more to the rise of the New Age movement, defined by Ross as “a countercultural formation in an age of technocratic crisis” (21).

Mack’s appeal is that abduction shatters the “consensus reality” constructed by science, that “none of this makes much sense in the framework of the Western ontological paradigm” (283-84). This is a self-protective position: doubters can be referred to their hopeless imprisonment in Western rationality. In claiming further that abduction is about surrendering to an “ego-death,” similar to the experience of near-death, meditation, and shamanism, it is evident that this discourse is a New Age one, beginning with a necessary apocalypse and ending in personal growth and expanded consciousness. Strieber and some of Mack’s patients are given visions of ecological catastrophe; many, once reintegrated, become healers, environmentalists, and New Age philosophers, replacing “abductee” with the more positive “experiencer” or “encountrant.”

The vast sales of books like *The Celestine Prophecy*, from over 4000 New Age bookshops in the US alone, suggests a large grouping around a countercultural and countermodern ethos. The rhetoric here is about abandoning destructive Western egoic and socio-economic goals for transparently Orientalized philosophies of spiritual growth: a de-traditionalized religiosity and consequent sacralization of the Self (see Heelas). Its principal targets are narrowly defined scientific rationality and technological dependence. This may indeed prompt a shift to “reason’s nemesis: religion, mysticism, myth” (Aronowitz 8), but as both Heelas and Ross point out, New Ageism is both countermodern and exemplary of modernity. In its de-politicized stance and its turn inward toward self-responsibility and the wealth of spiritual power, the New Ager conforms ideally to the late capitalist subject. In its attack on science and technology, it is nevertheless desperate for scientific legitimation: “the authority of dominant scientific claims is respected and emulated even as it is contested by apprentices, amateurs, semi-legitimates and outlaws who are detached in some degree from the authentic institutions of science” (Ross 9).

I have mentioned how abduction researchers appropriate psychiatric discourse to invent various Syndromes and Disorders. Raymond Fowler, an openly New Ageist researcher, linking the experience to early nature religions and Native American and Celtic mythology, is nevertheless fascinated by the *sound* of technical authenticity. Betty, describing a UFO landing, reports: “and the *being* says they are purging and lining the *cyclonetic trowel*.... Balancing the oscillating telemeter wheels.... Rotating series of semi-full swing back.... Magnetic rings and the depolarized rim” (*The Watchers* 76-77). This meaningless litany, common to pulp sf, is accompanied by detailed drawings, exhaustively annotated. Her halting descriptions of this super-technology, however, are swept away by the sublime response to the *spectacle* (“And those *balls of light*.... And, oh, it, that—*Those rainbows* are so beautiful! [*sighs*]. Oh this is so beautiful” [78]) and the message of “the Watchers” (“They love mankind. They love planet earth.... They watch the *spirit* in all things.... *Man is destroying much of nature*” [119]). The spirituality of the aliens is wholly dependent on their technology, and the fascination with alien abduction comes, in this more avowedly mystical aspect, from terror’s inverse: “Increasing

numbers are taking advantage of technological progress to enhance the efficacy of what perhaps the New Age is best at doing: transporting people into other realms—enchancing them; introducing new experiences” (Heelas 217). Such transportation was literalized by those involved in the Heaven’s Gate mass suicide, where “death” was seen as an ecstatic release from the body to join the angelic spaceships trailing in the wake of the Hale-Bopp comet: a bizarre conjunction of hightech, UFO mythology, and millenarian cultism.

Whilst abduction and New Ageism are contemporary responses to late modern contexts, they are also astonishing historical reiterations of arguments and figurations deriving from the late nineteenth century, the moment when paradigms in psychology and physics were shifting. Kuhn famously argued that “during the crises that lead to large-scale changes of paradigm, scientists usually develop many speculative and unarticulated theories” (61): psychical research in the 1880s matches abduction research in the 1980s. Mack’s rhetoric, in particular, is one hundred years old. Telepathy is the clue: Mack repeats the discourse of the amateur psychologist who coined the term *telepathy* in 1882, Frederic Myers. Where Mack says, in conclusion, that “the converting principle, the force that expands our consciousness beyond ourselves, appears to be love” (420) and that alien contact is about “personal evolution” (204), Myers claimed telepathy was the sign of “spiritual evolution” and that a sense of connectedness to the universe was marked by love. “Love is a kind of exalted, but unspecialized telepathy” within the universe, where “like atoms, like suns, like galaxies, our spirits are systems of forces which vibrate continually to each other’s power” (282). Myers, too, attacked the limits of Western science and materialism, arguing that proof of telepathy suggested “Science...need be no longer fettered by the limitations of this planetary standpoint” (290). Victorian psychical researchers were much like modern UFOlogists, then: both challenge orthodox science with a mystical project, yet cling to scientific methodology for legitimacy. Mack is an up-dated Myers; Fowler, with his interest in out-of-body and near-death experiences, is a modern Oliver Lodge, the physicist who theorized spirit as detachable ethereal body and invented radio by mistake, during experiments on telepathy. Historical repetition at moments of crisis is a common phenomenon—Marx noted it of revolutions—so this should come as no surprise. Are the UFOlogists aware that their psychological technique now, at the end of Freud’s influence, repeats the uncovering of aliens at the beginning of the Freudian epoch?¹¹ Théodore Flournoy, whose *From India to Planet Mars* was published in 1899, spent some six years attending the trance séances of Hélène Smith, who claimed, among other things, to be a one-time Princess of Mars.

The shadowy and often culturally encoded boundary of science and pseudoscience is the zone occupied, in different ways, by New Ageism, UFOlogy and sf. To place sf in this zone may offend those who hold to strictly “rational” models of sf as genre, but it should be coming clear from my argument that popular responses to science have always contained elements of mysticism. I have more sympathy with Vivian Sobchack’s position that sf ought to be seen in a spectrum including religious and magical elements (see *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film*, 1991). Thus, the science-fiction-

alization of the contents of traumatic forgetting often edges toward the mystical: as Nye says, sublimity is “essentially religious” (xiii).

The sublime is also linked to “attempts to obtain hidden knowledge” (Nye 4), and adjusting the focus on abduction to the more alarmist accounts opens a different response to the contemporary technologized world: the vast, *hidden* motivation of the alien conspiracy.

4. Conspiracy Theories. Welcome to the world of MIBs, MJ-12, HPACs, and RHIC: *History as we know it is a lie*.¹² Although UFO conspiracy theory and abduction research are not identical, there is sufficient overlap to explain how the two fields have merged in the popular imaginary. Alien abduction is merely one generic route for a pervasive *cultural paranoia* in America, which O’Donnell describes as “a way of seeing the multiple stratifications of reality, virtual and material, as interconnected or networked” (182). UFO conspiracies conform perfectly to the “paranoid style”—the utter conviction in massive infiltration, the millenarian angst, the evil genius of the enemy, the obsessive accumulation of “evidence”¹³—and interweave left-leaning concerns about industrial capital, autonomous government agencies, and the military with rightist suspicions of “big government.” Either the government knows about abduction and is executing “the most aggressive and ingenious cover-up in history” (Lindemann 11), or the government knows nothing, and there is barely concealed glee that “an intelligence from somewhere else is...bypassing political structure, is bypassing governmental censorship” (Linda Howe in Bryan 164). Either the military is experimenting with alien technology, or it is desperately powerless in the face of massive and systematic intrusion. Take your pick.

The structure of trauma, of the sublime, is repeated in conspiracy theory because conspiracies are concerned with *gaps*, with missing documents or silenced speech, and the furious activity of filling the holes by narratively ingenious connections—provided, once more, by *sf*. The rallying call is the neat maxim “Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence” (Bryan 207), which allows any empty space to be crammed with knowledge of alien presence. Theorists like Timothy Good or Martin Friedman are therefore obsessed with what lies beneath the blacked-out lines of government documents, with the blank accounts for military budgets, with the lack of knowledge about what is going on inside Area 51 (Richard Boyland, though, has a pretty good idea—with the aid of a clairvoyant “remote viewer” [Bryan, 238]). Conspiracies even lever open gaps where none were suspected; Good’s inspired example is the alleged excision from the tape of Armstrong’s moonwalk: “Those babies are huge, sir.... I’m telling you there are other spacecraft out there” (380), lines snipped by NASA. It is impossible to argue with these theorists: it would be an argument over a gap, an absence. When Randle and Schmitt assert “Everything needed to prove that Roswell represented the crash of an extraterrestrial spacecraft would be found, if those reports were ever released” (111), it is no good responding that they might equally *disprove* it: they have a great story to fill the hole, and you have not.

It was this mimicry of rationalism and entirely coherent systems of belief

that caused Freud anxiety in dealing with paranoiacs. In offering his view of the paranoid system elaborated in Judge Schreber's *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* (1903), he was left having to distance his own theory from Schreber's delusional beliefs: "I can...call a friend and fellow-specialist to witness that I had developed my theory of paranoia before I became acquainted with the contents of Schreber's book" (218). This anxiety implies that theory *per se* "is always a paranoid system" (Bersani 118). Abduction conspiracy theories are often highly intelligent, at times very perceptive in discerning the manipulations of the military-industrial complex, even if they begin from decidedly shaky theses. This is presumably why Jameson considers conspiracy theory "the *beginning* of wisdom" (*Geopolitical Aesthetic* 3, my emphasis).

But what does the conspiratorial text *allegorize*, and why the science-fictionalization of conspiracy where the genres of espionage thriller and detective fiction had sufficed for Kennedy and Watergate? Is it that the stability required to sanction epistemological questions has been replaced by crises in ontological Being-in-the-world—the shift Brian McHale suggests, in *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), displaces detective fiction with sf as exemplary genre? Abduction initially seems close to the paranoia experienced by Schreber. His delusional system is uncannily echoed by abduction—from the fears of emasculation and impregnation by the sun's *beams of light*, to the terror he inserted into arrogant superiority in viewing himself as giving birth to "a new race of men" (Freud 147), to the incidental details of being implanted with feminine nerves by "'little men' in his feet" (Freud 193) and "terrifying" visions of "the end of the world" (Freud 207). Freud's view of this system was to see it as the product of a father-complex, a desire for the father projected outward and returning as persecution. Rather than attempting to psychoanalyze abduction accounts (although this untimely temptation is there: fathers recur often),¹⁴ I propose we see this conspiratorial structure emerging at a moment when something is seen to have gone wrong with the *founding fathers'* American Constitution and when there is a sense of traumatic disruption to American manifest destiny. The benign paternal state has been shattered by disclosures concerning its consistent invasion of its citizenry, since the first atom bomb tests (see Nelson). Worse, since the advent of transnational capital, technological penetrations arise from a nationless, unworldly circuit. If this is felt "to constitute a *system*, a world-wide disembodied yet increasingly total system of relationships and networks hidden beneath the appearance of daily life" (Jameson, "On *Diva*" 118), narratives of alien abduction, rather than cyberpunk should be the exemplary allegorical site to consider, since these resort to more culturally available sf tropes, laid down since the 1950s. How "paranoid" would it be to suggest that this science-fictional framework of abduction, beyond domestic technological transformations, also allegorizes post-national anxiety perversely reiterating the foundation of America—an economy based, after all, on the abduction of Africans into slavery? Since September 1985, the US has become a debtor nation to Japan, whose multinationals, to some, are proceeding to "abduct" sections of American manufacturing and entertainment industry. Abduction narratives would thus recapitulate slave origins and anxieties over multicultural "miscegenation" and fully express the ambivalence

towards the discourse of the technological sublime now wrested from a national destiny gone awry.

Hofstadter remarks that “higher paranoid scholarship...is nothing if not coherent—in fact, it is far more coherent than the real world” (36). My four routes into the phenomenon of alien abduction are designed to open suggestive routes into the reasons for the cultural appeal of this science-fictionalized “trauma.” If they map onto each other somewhat imperfectly, then perhaps that is part of the point, since the “raw” genre of alien abduction is generated out of the messy, disordered everyday world, trying to construct operable imaginaries to explain complexities shimmering on the edge of comprehension.

Conclusion: *The X-Files*. It should have become clear from my preceding analysis that *The X-Files* is at once fiction and a peculiar sort of “documentary” compendium of pseudo-scientific and conspiratorial texts. There is a certain circularity here, since, as Bersani suggests, conspiracy theories rely on “the alluringly corny plots of popular culture,” and adds that “the plots of popular culture are overwhelmingly coercive without constituting anything more definite than a readiness to be seduced by other plots” (115-16). *The X-Files* is at once reflective and constitutive of conspiracy about abduction and cover-up, and has already become embroiled in conspiracies concerning its hidden purpose.¹⁵

Thematically, the series touches on all four bases that I have outlined. Memoro-politics figures in episodes on past life regression, Satanic abuse, mesmeric power, and the constant arguments between Mulder and Scully on the efficacy of hypnotic recovery. Mulder has invasive flashbacks of childhood, Scully of abduction. The technological sublime informs the series, starting from the second episode (“Deep Throat”) where Mulder encounters and is pinioned with awe by the beam of a UFO at Area 51, a memory then excised by the military, thus rendering the experience doubly unavailable to articulation. Standard scientific and medical procedures are constantly extended to invoke biotechnological advances, and allow the series to move between “body horror” (“Tooms”) and more scientific extrapolations of genetic manipulation. The series also has its New Age elements: Mulder, Scully, and Skinner have had Near Death Experiences, and whilst Scully sat embarrassedly in an over-symbolic boat, Mulder’s journey rather objectionably appropriated Navajo ritual. There is a predilection for exoticizing other cultures, whether Puerto Rican shamanism, strict religious sects (rendered *as alien* in “Genderbender”), or West African lost “albino” tribes (pure Rider Haggard!). Episodic visits to such Fortean topics as spontaneous human combustion and atavistic lake monsters, however, are evidently secondary to the overarching serial narrative of abduction and government conspiracy.

The “arc” of the series cannibalizes conspiracy material more opportunistically than coherently, stealing plots and iconographies from Frankenheimer’s *The Manchurian Candidate*, Coppola’s *The Conversation* and Pollack’s *Three Days of the Condor*, and from its spiritual father, Pakula’s paranoia trilogy, *Klute*, *The Parallax View*, and *All the President’s Men*. The manically radial growth of the conspiracy plot has moved into the field of Pynchon’s *Gravity’s*

Rainbow during series three. The hesitation between extraterrestrial and governmental conspiracy interweaves industrial and military complicity in Axis power atrocities, from experimentation on civilian populations to the prospect of a kind of “genetic” surveillance from birth (one of Tyrone Slothrop’s beliefs). Cancer Man’s multinational group of conspirators owes much to Pynchon’s secret capitalist cartel and to theories about a shadowy “Fraternity” in World War Two, American industrialists who sought profit through Nazi power. “Real world” conspiracies are woven in: safe passage for Japanese and German doctors and scientists after 1945 has been well documented, and Scully’s outburst that “apology has become policy” is clearly a reference to Clinton’s recent public apology on the injection of citizenry with radioactive materials in the 1950s.

Alien abduction, though, is the prime motor force. Chris Carter (the creator of the series) has nominated John Mack’s *Abduction* as the inspiration of the series, although the scenes of Duane Barry’s abduction, for instance, owe more to conspiratorial and alarmist accounts: aliens and government agents seem interchangeable in Barry’s flashbacks, and the “Abduction” trilogy of which it forms the opening part unravels into a wholly engineered scenario. The episode is both an exploitation of and intelligent reflection on the abduction phenomenon. Barry’s narrative, told by sudden, violent flashback is *incited* by Mulder’s will to believe, his coercive questions (“There are beings, aren’t there, Duane? They take you, against your will.... You’re powerless.... It’s always the same”). Mulder’s compromising knowledge of generic abduction is played off against Scully’s psychological profiling.¹⁶ If this oscillation is somewhat tiringly replayed over and over, the series is evidently interested in always tipping the balance towards the sublime excess of scientific and social knowledges, opening the speculative space where science-fictionality becomes the truth “out there.” This does not prevent the serial story from being overturned and parodied, however. The extraordinary episode, “José Chung’s *From Outer Space*,” wittily demolishes the thesis of alien abduction by overloading its conspiratorial plots to extreme lengths and presenting abduction as a narrative open to the endlessly mobile fantasy identifications of its participants. Abduction here becomes nothing more than a confabulation of ceaselessly shifting renarration, suggestibility, and dubious hypnotic recovery—“a new genre—a non-fiction science fiction,” as Chung suggests.

What could explain the astonishing success of the series around the world? How has it been able to turn a marginal and lunatic pursuit—researching abductions—into a narrative that has entered into popular consciousness? For me, the character of Fox Mulder is the key. Played with comic understatement, Mulder is nevertheless invested with a powerful aura of melancholy. His intra-familial traumas are transcoded into extrafamilial politics seamlessly, the “flashback” recovery of his sister’s abduction played out against Nixon’s resignation, thus sealing the identity of the personal and political. That his father betrays both children and nation, that the origin of post-war conspiracy in some way concerns paternal legacy, is another plot device to lock levels together around paranoia, rendering family and state as mutually informing

structures. It is tempting to read a displaced narrative of abuse here (the father chooses the "abduction" of the daughter, leaving the son driven to fill the traumatic gap with multiple suturing narratives—inevitably leading him to discover *multiples* of his sister at the end of the third series), were not the writers wary enough of the privileged claim on truth which abuse holds in contemporary culture. "Samantha," after all, is *not* Mulder's computer password, and he explicitly refutes Scully's reading of his compulsions to repeat as motivated by his absent sister.

What Mulder represents is a resistance to the *intermittency of subjectivity* in the contemporary moment: fighting the phantasmal Controllers of the object-world, whose invasive technologies are excising or revising communal, personal and historical memory. These interruptions, these enforced gaps, are the theme of the overarching narrative in *The X-Files* that itself only intermittently surfaces. Mulder's science-fictionalized contents for these gaps are continually grasped only to be lost: he sees the UFO, but has the memory erased; he collects the tape of extraterrestrial communication, but finds it blank; Scully gains the alien fetus, only to trade it for Mulder's life. Mulder knows, paradoxically, what he does not know; he grasps the shape of the absence to be filled. Since any detail of the mundane world can open onto this space, his experience is one continually on the brink of sublime expanses, sublime knowledge. The series allows momentary access onto figurations of the *total archive*, sites which constitute the final resting places of the truth of the excised, traumatic gap. The last image of the first series is Cancer Man placing the alien fetus with others; the camera pans back to reveal a vast stock-room of secrets, before a door marked "Pentagon" interrupts the gaze. Similarly, the mountain-side archive of the US populace is uncovered only to be lost: absolute knowledge shimmers into view, but its contents can never be fully imbibed, and shadowy agents are destroying it as they go. It is the structure of this reiterated plot that points to the success of *The X-Files*: Mulder suffers the intermittency of a subject constructed around trauma, but his quest, his will to believe, suggests the deferred promise of the total archive's answering contents. The allegory of abduction—and Scully is there to ensure it *remains* allegorical, not literal—can thus speak to a potentially vast array of cultural concerns. The series depends on this suspended finality, exploiting (somewhat brutally) the anxiety of the structural absence as constitutive of subjectivity. Something is felt to be missing: whether personal memory, familial trauma, technologized excisions to the life-world, or the loss of transparent governmentality, alien abduction is the science fiction that can articulate these gaps within a compelling narrative which, most importantly, places agency and responsibility *out there*.

Narratives of alien abduction and the whole area of abduction research conform to a definition of "marginal science,"¹⁷ and is clearly an extension of the pseudo-sciences of mesmerism and psychical research—all of them concern the anomalous phenomena of trance. Driven by a small coterie of convinced believers, the fate of such pursuits is to be treated by the majority with contempt and dismissal. Nevertheless, I would argue that the scenario of alien

abduction is a highly revealing phantasmatic network of ideas, and is worth considering for a number of reasons. Social historians of science continue to bemoan that “we have scarcely any understanding of the range of beliefs entertained by lay members of our society” (Shapin 994), and that popular meanings of sciences are too often treated as diluted or misconceived appropriations of “proper” science. In a sense, this view only reinforces the conception of Science as an autonomous authority which “disciplines” its passive public out of incorrect beliefs and into correct knowledge. Historical work has begun on the social meanings of the appropriations of science by the populace in the nineteenth century,¹⁸ and I hope that I have shown that accounts of alien abduction can provide similar resources for the contemporary moment. Abduction presents an oblique account of post-war America through the lens of sf tropes, its paranoid conspiracies revealing much about the terrors and ecstasies attendant to the transformations of capitalized and technologized life-worlds. It offers an insight into shifting modes of conceiving contemporary subjectivity through the categories of memory and trauma. And finally, it tells us something about the role of sf in contemporary America. If we are to take seriously the view that sf has broken the bounds of genre and come to colonize the real, such sub- and mass-cultural accounts have to be considered, even as they demonstrate that sf may be of more use for “irrational” belief-systems than the rational/cognitive account of the genre admits. I am less interested, in the end, in plaintive remarks about the “death” of sf or the traumatization of science fiction, than in the ongoing process of the science-fictionalization of trauma.

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1. Budd Hopkins lambasts the “junk-jewelry vision” of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (*Missing Time* 228), and argues that “basic sci-fi myths” cannot approach the “ethical complexity” of actual abduction accounts (*Intruders* 277). Meanwhile, contemporary sf is often written in ironic distance from UFOlogy. Gibson’s “The Gernsback Continuum” provides its own theory of UFOs as “semiotic ghosts,” whilst Gwyneth Jones’ *White Queen* is full of sly references: “at least he didn’t wake up in a spaceship. That would have been unbearably banal” (37).

2. No one, so far as I know, has pointed out that Octavia Butler’s *Dawn* (1987) proceeds from a classic abduction scenario, Lilith “awoken” in an enclosed room, on an examination table, naked, with amnesia about the scar across her abdomen, “augmented” by injections on the neck, and slowly realizing she has been coerced into a hybrid breeding program. That the whole XENOGENESIS trilogy is premised on the nuclear destruction of Earth is also consonant with the apocalyptic visions of abductees, as reported by John Mack.

3. Many UFOlogists would immediately resist my localization of abduction to America, but I insist that this has to be considered as a fundamentally American narrative, for reasons that will become increasingly clear. Whilst reports of this experience are collected globally, investment in them and their collation are principally American concerns. Newman and Baumeister suggest the phenomena are isolated to the UK and USA, but even amongst the UFO community, differences are clear. Of the two principal UFOlogists in England, Jenny Randles considers it a psychological phenomenon, and Timothy Good can only offer two unintentionally hilarious accounts from Britain: a 77-year-old man who is invited onto a ship, scanned, then told “You

can go. You are too old and infirm for our purpose" (107) and a police officer somewhat embarrassed by his own hypnotic recovery of an abduction (117).

4. See, for instance: Debbie North and Michael Snedeker, *Satan's Silence: Ritual Abuse and the Making of a Modern American Witch-Hunt* (1995), Robert D. Hicks, *In Pursuit of Satan: The Police and the Occult* (1991), and Ofshe and Wright in works cited below.

5. Scott is comparing the definitions in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in 1984 and 1994. This is an admirable redefinition, but one that might perhaps be open to misapplication.

6. For a summary of the Jeffrey Masson dispute, see Scott (Chapter 1), and Borch-Jacobsen's "Neurotica."

7. Victorian fiction is full of master-villains with evil mesmeric powers—Doyle's Professor Moriarty, Stoker's Dracula, du Maurier's Svengali, Boothby's Dr. Nikola—as is sf. Here again we see confirmation of Hacking's view that "clinician and storyteller so obviously reinforce each other" (*Rewriting* 73).

8. Lack of space means a fuller investigation of the problematic ignorance of Freud is not possible here: a Freudian would not, I think, reduce abduction to sexual fantasy as some researchers suggest—this is an impoverished notion of psychoanalysis which would wish to discuss transference, countertransference, the speculative "fantastic" stories children make up about the "family romance," and "dream-work" logics.

9. Hacking considers that driving may be one of the last spaces for "trance" left in a Western economy that has tried to stamp out its lack of utility; for a more apocalyptic view of the freeway as a place of organized *distraction*, see Margaret Morse, "An Ontology of Everyday Distraction: The Freeway, The Mall, and Television" (*Logics of Television*. Ed. Patricia Mellencamp. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1990. 193-221).

10. For Cromwell Varley, see his submission to the *Report on Spiritualism of the Committee of the London Dialectical Society, Together with the evidence, oral and written, and a selection from the Correspondence* (1871). For telephone ghosts, see Ronell's *The Telephone Book: Technology—Schizophrenia—Electric Speech* (1989); for Richet and photographic ghosts, see Michael Roth's "Hysterical Remembering" (*Modernism/Modernity* 3.2:1-30, 1996). Kipling's "Wireless" is collected in *Traffics and Discoveries* (1920).

11. Elaine Showalter has made a similar point in *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Culture* (1997) which reads alien abduction as one form of a resurgence of "hysterical" symptomatology in contemporary American culture. I have some problems with Showalter's tendency to reduce abduction accounts to displaced forms of sexual fantasy, but her contextual work on psychological paradigms is extremely valuable.

12. Men in Black (government or alien agents who intimidate and discredit UFO witnesses and abductees who go public), Majestic-12 (a group allegedly involved in investigating the Roswell saucer crash in 1947, and responsible for analyzing the alien bodies recovered there), Human Powered Alien Craft (allegedly the project at Area 51, Nevada, USAF pilots learning to fly recovered alien ships), Remote Hypnotic Intra-cerebral Control (alien and/or CIA means of controlling victims, as in the film *The Manchurian Candidate*). "History as we know it..." is a quote from the opening sequence of the TV series *Dark Skies*.

13. The portrait built up by Richard Hofstadter's "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," a lecture originally given at a significant moment: November 1963.

14. Strieber's account is littered with references to the imbrication of his uncovering of abduction with mourning the death of his father, even in one case seeing his father during an abduction ("Oh, Daddy! Daddy don't be so scared!" [*Communion* 87]), C.D.B. Bryan's tonally dispassionate account of the MIT abduction conference only reveals in a footnote that he was treated with some suspicion since his father, a USAF

Colonel, was held responsible by conspiracy theorists for the CIA infiltration of NICAP (National Investigative Committee of Aerial Phenomena). "While I was growing up," Bryan adds, "my father's unswerving, out-spoken faith in the existence of UFOs, which he maintained until his death in 1993, was, I felt, somewhat of an embarrassment" (256), something presumably assuaged by the massive tome, *Close Encounters of the Fourth Kind*. That Spielbergian echo also allows comment on the fact that absent fathers are significant in both *Close Encounters* and *E.T.*

15. An example that incorporates the series into wider conspiracy: "an intelligence source said that the US government has been 'conditioning' the public for the reality of UFOs, aliens, and governmental cover-ups. This is being carried out using television and movies" (Cory Sine, "TV De-Sensitization," AUFORA Journal, Spring 1995). My source for this can be found on the internet at: www.aufora.org. Such a position is inevitable, given the persistent rumours about government involvement in films like *The Day the Earth Stood Still* or *Close Encounters*. Don Ware's view is typical: "I think our government decided to educate us about the larger reality primarily through fiction, in an effort to keep from scaring us too much. And I think that's still going on. I think when you watch *Star Trek: The Next Generation* on television, or when you watch *Alien Nation*, you are getting concepts put before you that you need to understand if you're going to be able to accept the larger reality" (Ware in Lindemann 197—interviewed prior to *The X-Files*.)

16. Scully's profile of Duane Barry, incidentally, compares him to Phineas Gage. This shows the impressive range of cannibalized sources: Scully, presumably, had just read Antonio Damasio's *Descartes' Error*, an introduction to brain neurology which opens with the Gage case.

17. I am using the definition of "marginal science" provided by Seymour Mauskopf in "Marginal Science" (*Companion to the History of Modern Science*. Ed. R.C. Olby et al. London: Routledge, 1990. 869-885).

18. See, for instance, Roger Cooter, *The Cultural Meaning of Popular Science* (1984); Alison Winter, "Mesmerism and Popular Culture in Early Victorian England" (*History of Science* 32, 1994: 317-43); Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychological Research in England 1850-1914* (1985).

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ABSTRACT

The cultural phenomenon of alien abduction narratives has been met with silence or contempt by most of the academic community. This is an understandable response, given the mix of credulity, pseudo-scientific legitimation and uncontrolled paranoia surrounding the discourse of abduction. This essay argues that however outlandish the claims of UFOlogists and abduction researchers, the phenomenon is worthy of study for its evidence of an increasing "science-fictionalisation" of certain aspects of contemporary American culture. Four vectors are identified as being responsible for the emergence of abduction stories: shifts in conceptions of memory and subjectivity in American psychiatry (particularly claims surrounding "recovered memory" and hypnotic regression); increasing fears around the intrusiveness of a technologically saturated world, and subsequent extension of the discourse of the American technological sublime; the emergence of a distinctive counter-cultural New Ageism, which articulates the visitation of UFOs in larger discourses of spiritual evolution; an intensification of post-war American conspiracy theory and suspicions of "big government." Ending with a reading of the way in which these elements are synthesized by *The X-Files*, the essay concludes by suggesting that abduction narratives are the science fictionalised products of a felt intermittency of subjectivity in contemporary America. (RL)